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Lucia A Keegan 11/28/2006 10:03:18 AM From DB/Inbox: Lucia A Keegan

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FROM USMISSION UNESCO PARIS

FOR OES - ANDREW REYNOLDS, ANTOINETTE CONDO, BARRIE RIPIN, CHRISTINE DAWSON
FOR IO - JIM DUFFY
DEPARTMENT PASS NSF FOR ROSE GOMBAY
DEPARTMENT PASS OSTP FOR GENE WHITNEY
DEPARTMENT PASS USGS FOR VERNE SCHNEIDER

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: UNESCO SCI SENV FAID SP

SUBJECT: UNESCO: MAN AND BIOSPHERE COORDINATING COUNCIL PONDERS FUTURE OF THE BIOSPHERE RESERVE PROGRAM

¶1. Summary. The 19th session of the MAB Coordinating Council focused on the need to define the program's future, particularly in the context of the formulation of the new UNESCO Medium-Term Strategy for 2008-2013. Issues debated included: the need to devise an appropriate approach to identifying the different zones within biosphere reserves; the need for enhanced cooperation at national and regional levels; the evolution of the relationship between development and biosphere reserves; and the use of Biosphere Reserves to further scientific research. Egypt proposed a new international convention for MAB. The U.S., supported by Costa Rica, noted the lack of support for such a convention and instead encouraged MAB to return to its original mission of science and research. The Spanish Minister of Environment, Ms. Cristina Narbona Ruiz, extended Spain's offer to host the Third World Congress of Biosphere Reserves in Madrid. The conference will take place in early February 2008. The Council adopted a five-point action plan (para 11). All summary documents pertaining to the overall session and presentations can be found at the MAB website:
<http://www.unesco.org/mab/icc/icc19th.shtml>.

¶2. The U.S. was represented at the meeting by Ambassador Louise V. Oliver and by USUNESCO science officer. NGO representatives Tom Gilbert (Biosphere Reserve Association) and Cathie Adams (Sovereignty International) participated as observers, with the former serving as a panelist. In his panel presentation, Gilbert stressed that member states need to develop criteria for their sites before any effort by the Secretariat to chart next steps for the program. Subsequent to the MAB ICC meeting, the Director of the MAB program, Ishwaran Natarajan informed the Mission that he plans to enhance cooperation with the U.S. including via UNESCO's New York office, a development on which the Mission will report separately.

(Comment: Mission suggests that IO/UNESCO contact the New York office to learn more about their plans regarding MAB. End Comment.)
End Summary.

¶13. In its opening remarks, the MAB Secretariat emphasized the need for MAB to adapt to and take advantage of current UN reform efforts, the next UNESCO Medium-Term Strategy and Program and Budget (C4/C5) exercises, as well as the ongoing Science Review. Regarding the Draft C4/C5, the MAB Secretariat proposed focusing on mission rationalization and on activities directly benefiting local and national stakeholders. The Secretariat called for better coordination between high-level MAB meetings and the meetings of UNESCO's Executive Board and General Conference.

¶14. In response to the Secretariat's comments, Egypt proposed that a committee of experts examine the possibility of an international convention for MAB in order to increase the visibility and the efficiency of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves, and to have a normative instrument that would have to be taken into account by policy makers. The U.S. expressed strong reservations on this proposal. Upon hearing Ambassador Oliver's objections to such a convention, Egypt stated that perhaps the discussion reflected a misunderstanding of its goals. Egypt noted that it wished to have an agreement on strategy to better link programs and to close the disparity between work done at the MAB Secretariat and work done by national and local networks. Ambassador Oliver emphasized that strategy and conventions are "two very different conversations," stressing the need for precise clarity when dealing with such proposals.

PROGRESS REPORTS IDENTIFY NEEDS

¶15. During the national and regional MAB committee progress reports, upcoming challenges and key issues were identified as: exploring the linkages between the MAB program and the Millennium Development Goals; improving government support; enhancing cooperation at all levels; strengthening the role of MAB networking at the national, sub-regional and regional levels; enhancing South-South and North-South-South cooperation; increasing the role of Biosphere Reserves as tools for coping and adapting to climate and socio-economic change; increasing the visibility of the program; studying the increasing importance of urban issues; and, concerns related to marine and coastal ecosystems and their management.

LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE: THE MEDIUM-TERM STRATEGY

¶16. During the Medium-Term Strategy Debate, Israel and the U.S. observer (Tom Gilbert) stressed the importance of the scientific role of Biosphere Reserves. Israel also highlighted the importance of taxonomy initiatives. Russia noted that at the program's inception, MAB had 14 international projects and suggested that some old programs be revisited. The Secretariat responded by saying that old programs could be revisited as long as they can contribute to today's MAB and will not expand MAB beyond its available resources. The Secretariat evoked a project on renewable energy as a possibility, as such a project would relate directly to land use. The United Kingdom suggested that some of the Medium-Term Strategy Strategic Program Objectives be tied to climate change, with Israel countering that it would be better to tie them to global change so as not to limit the objectives.

ROLE FOR BIOSPHERE RESERVES IN CONSERVATION, DEVELOPMENT, AND AS SCIENCE LABS

¶17. Three panels provided an appraisal of future challenges for the Biosphere Reserve program, particularly in attaining the 2010 biodiversity target of the Convention on Biological Diversity and the MDG-7 (environmental sustainability).

¶18. Panel one explored the role played by Biosphere Reserves as learning laboratories for conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. The Swedish panelist and U.S. panelist (Tom Gilbert) suggested the reformulation of zoning schemas of Biosphere Reserves to reflect national and local zoning practices. In his presentation, Gilbert also stressed that member states need to develop criteria for their sites before any effort by the Secretariat to plot future strategy for the program. Other

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panelists stressed that the relationship between conservation and development needs to be specified for each of the three zones of the Biosphere Reserves: core, buffer, and transitional. The idea of new types of protected areas, such as "archipelago reserves" and ecological corridors linking dispersed protected areas, was put forth by the panel. The Swedish panelist highlighted the need to increase coordination with the Ramsar Convention and other multilateral environmental agreements. In response to the panel presentation, Mexico argued that an examination of whether a biosphere is actually conserving biodiversity is necessary. Given climate change, some reserves may no longer be fulfilling this function; therefore, rehabilitation of these reserves may be necessary. Argentina called for a clearer identification, as well as reasoning, of what type of development is to be permitted in the three different zones.

¶9. Panel two addressed the issue of socio-economic, human and institutional development in Biosphere Reserves. Panelists proposed rethinking the necessary integration of the three functions (conservation, development and logistic) of the Biosphere Reserve model. A German panelist suggested that an emphasis be put on the elaboration of stronger socio-economic criteria in the designation of Biosphere Reserves. Panelists identified the urgent need to develop interaction between stakeholders at different levels, as well as the necessity of developing cooperation among reserves. In response to the panel, Chile called for clearer language on the types of development to be permitted in each of the three zones and asked that the maintenance of conservation remain the key priority for Biosphere Reserves. Egypt argued that social and economic criteria should be equal to biological criteria in selecting Biosphere Reserves. Austria made a proposition concerning Biosphere Reserves created before the adoption of the Seville Strategy (which says that a reserve must fulfill three functions: conservation of biodiversity, sustainable development, and logistical support). These "first-generation" Biosphere Reserves fulfill a uniquely research function. Austria, with the subsequent support of the United Kingdom and Israel, thus proposed creating a new "research" category for these Biosphere Reserves.

¶10. Panel three reaffirmed the role of Biosphere Reserves as privileged sites for creating and transmitting knowledge. A panel proposal presented by the Swedish Chair suggested that UNESCO take the lead role in building a global infrastructure for an evidence-based approach to ecosystem management, for which multi-stakeholder cooperation should exist along with an effort to build upon the achievements of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. Sweden also proposed the creation of a framework for long-term ecological and social monitoring and research to develop partnerships between the World Network of Biosphere Reserves and the scientific community (the MISTRA Institute). During the ensuing discussion, the gap between scientists and policy professionals was addressed, as well as the need for more cooperation between all levels and actors.

¶11. At the close of the 19th ICC, a provisional five-point roadmap for the future was adopted. The document confirmed as priorities: developing more efficient coordination with UNESCO's Executive Board and General Conference; considering both conservation and development in reviewing the criteria for each of the three zones (core, buffer, and transitional) within Biosphere Reserves; coordinating science, policy, and practice for Biosphere Reserves as learning platforms; strengthening MAB and the Biosphere Reserve Regional Networks so that they become the main drivers of MAB and Biosphere Reserve agendas; and, identifying policy and political initiatives to make Biosphere Reserves centers of learning for sustainable development.

TWENTY FIVE NEW SITES APPROVED

¶12. The ICC elected new members to the Bureau with Sweden as Chair and Russia, Chile, Vietnam, Ethiopia, and Sudan acting as Vice-Chairs. The newly-elected Bureau members approved 25 new biosphere reserves, with the admittance of the first-ever transcontinental reserve, the Intercontinental Biosphere Reserve of the Mediterranean located in the Moroccan and Spanish territories. The new sites brought the total number of Biosphere Reserves to 507 located in 102 countries. Debate on the proposed sites concerned

zoning as certain candidates contain mostly marine and desert areas in which there is a lack of terrestrial criteria typically needed for zoning. New challenges therefore arise on how to identify each of the three zones (core, buffer, and transitional) in such areas.

¶13. The first Michel Batisse Award for biosphere reserve management was given to Ms Birgit Reutz-Hornsteiner, from Austria, for her work as the manager of the Biosphere Reserve Grosses Walsertal, Austria.
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